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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000732

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR S/SEMEP AND NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MEPP](#) [TS](#) [XF](#)

SUBJECT: TUNISIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Tunisia has an historically strong track record of constructive contributions to the Middle East peace process. Unfortunately, like other Arab states, Tunisia's engagement has been largely dormant since the eruption of the second Intifada in 2000. Like other Arab governments, Tunisian leaders' wariness of public opinion toward the peace process comes even as their domestic media, tightly controlled by the state, are complicit in fanning the flames. Nonetheless, Tunisia remains firmly placed in the "moderate" camp. The Tunisian government is a strong supporter of Abu Mazen's government and is very wary of Hamas. We believe the Tunisians are approachable with our ideas for constructive steps and confidence building measures, although they will not want to be seen to be leaning too far forward of the Arab League consensus. High-level engagement from the USG, ideally back-stopped by the EU, will be key to persuading the Tunisians to act. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Tunisia's historically constructive approach to Middle East peace dates back to at least 1965, when President Bourguiba was the first Arab leader to publicly advocate normalization with Israel. Agreeing to host the retreating PLO, Tunisia was key to defusing the siege of Beirut in 1982, and later played a key facilitative role in initial diplomatic contacts between the USG and the PLO.

¶3. (SBU) In the wake of the Madrid conference in 1990, Tunisia was the first Maghreb country to agree to participate in the peace process multilateral group meetings, and Tunisia was the first Arab country to host a multilateral group meeting, concerning refugees, in 1993. Tunisia went on to host several other multilateral group meetings in 1994, 1995, and 1996. Tunisia allowed Israel to open a Trade Office in Tunis in April 1996, and then opened its own Trade Office in Tel Aviv in May 1996. These offices continued to function until the eruption of the second Intifada in the fall of ¶2000.

¶4. (C) Since 2000, Tunisia has largely stayed with the Arab League consensus, usually eschewing direct bilateral diplomatic contacts with Israel. However, Israeli Foreign Minister Shalom participated in the UN World Summit on the Information Society staged in Tunisia in November 2005. At the time, Shalom, born in Gabes, southern Tunisia, visited several Tunisian cities and was received by President Ben Ali. At the non-official level, Israelis can and do visit Tunisia, entering on their Israeli passports without restrictions or difficulty. Hundreds of Israeli citizens, mainly of Tunisian ancestry, attend an annual Jewish festival on the southern island of Djerba.

¶5. (C) Like other moderate Arab states, Tunisia has clearly been wary of public opinion, which has been enflamed by images of violence from Israeli-Arab conflicts, particularly the fighting in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and in Gaza in early 2009. Tunisian leaders occasionally complain to us

that Al-Jazeera's coverage of these conflicts has riled Tunisian public opinion, limiting the Government of Tunisia (GOT)'s perceived range of policy options. Ironically, Tunisian media, tightly controlled by the state, actively fans the flames of public anger regarding the conflict. The Tunisian tabloid press in particular, while slavishly obsequious in its coverage of President Ben Ali, has a free hand to publish as fact outrageous conspiracy theories involving Israel and Jews, and generally imbalanced coverage of events in the Israel-Palestine theatre. (Comment: Obviously, the Tunisians are more concerned about Al-Jazeera's frank and unflattering coverage of domestic repression in Tunisia than its inflammatory coverage of Arab-Israeli conflict. End comment.)

¶6. (C) The GOT nonetheless remains firmly in the moderate camp of Arab states. The Tunisians regularly offer public support for Abu Mazen's government, and are cool to Hamas, which they certainly view with discomfort as an ideological analogue to Tunisia's domestic Islamic opposition. Senior Tunisians regularly profess their desire to see the peace process revived, and to play a helpful (if vaguely defined) role, as Foreign Minister Abdallah did during his initial meeting with the Ambassador on September 17, and during his meeting on with Senator Mitchell on the margins of UNGA.

¶7. (C) We believe Tunisia will be willing to re-engage in multilateral Arab-Israeli working groups and would be willing to consider participating in other confidence building measures the U.S. might wish to propose. The reopening of bilateral trade offices will be viewed by the Tunisians as a risky move that would require a significant gesture in

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advance from the Israeli side. Foreign Minister Abdallah tells us he is deeply skeptical of Israeli good will on core issues such as settlement expansion. The Tunisians (and, we suspect, fellow Arab moderates), would likely insist on an unambiguous settlement freeze as a prerequisite to reopening trade offices.

¶8. (C) The Tunisian government places a premium on interaction with senior-level USG officials, and such high level engagement will be required to persuade them to take steps they will view as domestically risky. Actions coordinated with the EU, with whom Tunisia has extremely deep and broad relations, will have a greater likelihood of success. While we believe the Tunisians can and will play a constructive role, we should not count on them to blaze paths. They will certainly want diplomatic cover, acting in concert with other moderate Arab states in every step forward.
GRAY